THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION AS A LEARNING STRATEGY IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Abstract

The purpose of this work is to study the role of translation in ESL within a learning strategy framework, and it seeks to find and provide both theoretical and empirical evidence for it. And, since translation had to be studied within a learning strategy framework, it was considered necessary to deal with the background of learning strategy literature, which has been taken up in the first chapter of the work.

The chapter starts with a consideration of the available theoretical background for language learning strategies. Though learning strategies have been recognized now as an important construct, instrumental in the facilitation of learning, both in cognitive psychology and SLA, they have yet to be explained in a sufficiently elaborate manner in a theoretical model of language learning. This is evident from a brief discussion of the different models of language proficiency and language learning.

Secondly, the chapter describes various definitional and classificational studies both in cognitive psychology and SLA. Though the debate about the taxonomy of language learning strategies is not closed yet, most researchers
agree upon the broad categorization of strategies into
cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies.
Metacognitive strategies deal with thinking and planning
about the learning process; such as paying attention and
arranging for a proper learning atmosphere. Cognitive
strategies deal with the direct manipulation of the learning
material, such as note-taking and highlighting. Social and
affective strategies are also indirect strategies of
learning like the metacognitive strategies, in that they
address the social and affective demands of the learning
process, such as learning to mix up in a group, and allaying
fear of learning by self-talk.

The chapter deals next with strategy research relating
to variables affecting strategy use. A myriad of factors
such as task type; proficiency level, motivation, attitude,
learning style; age; sex; educational, linguistic, and
cultural background have been found to bear upon strategy
use. Studies related to validation of the effectiveness of
particular strategies and their trainability, though meagre
in number especially in SLA, are sufficient to demonstrate
that students can be trained successfully to use strategies
both with integrative and discrete language skills, and
their use by students leads to enhanced performance.

As the title suggests, the second chapter deals in
detail with the definition and classification of learning
strategies, and subsequently attempts to provide a revised taxonomy of language learning strategies. Learning strategies have been traditionally defined in cognitive psychology and SLA as those "operations or steps used by a learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage or retrieval of information" (Rigney 1978). These facilitative behaviours are generally related to the receptive side of language use. But since learning of a language involves both reception and production, the definition has been broadened in this work to include the production of language too. Therefore, strategies of language learning are proposed here as those particular thoughts or behaviours which help in acquisition, storage, retrieval and production of language.

With the inclusion of "production" within the domain of learning strategy, learning strategies can be regarded as the same as communication strategies. As learning a language consists of learning of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, so does communication in its broadest sense encompass them all. A need was felt subsequently, to reconsider the definition and classification of communication strategies as well. It was found before long, that the criteria on which the identification of communication strategies rest have become obsolete, as they chiefly represent an error-analysis view of language learning, in which learning chiefly means
avoiding errors. It was further found that all the strategies mentioned in communication strategies taxonomy can be explained within a taxonomy of language learning. Hence, ultimately language learning strategies and communication strategies are found to be one and the same, at least for all practical purposes, though one might retain a theoretical distinction between language reception and language production.

Two most prominent research efforts in language learning strategy field are represented by work carried out over a number of years by Oxford and O'Malley et al whose classification schemes have been reviewed briefly in this chapter (Oxford 1985, 1990, Oxford & Cohen 1992; O'Malley et al 1985a, b; O'Malley and Chamot 1988, 1990).

The researcher next attempts to provide a revised classification scheme based on O'Malley and Chamot's (1988, 1990) work, which draws upon cognitive psychology literature and views learning strategies chiefly as mental mechanisms, and strictly distinguishes them from outward physical behaviours. This gives their classification a clarity of perception in categorizing the strategies and wards off the dangers of mixing the criteria of outward behaviours with inner cognitive mechanisms. However, it was found that their classification could be made more hierarchically rigorous and systematic; hence a revised classification scheme.
The third chapter considers the role of L1 within different models and theories of second language learning. Three main theories have been dealt with: Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Creative Construction and Information Processing Theory. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis based on behaviourist learning theory and structuralist linguistics, proposed that differences between the first and the second language create difficulty in learning leading to errors, while the similarities between the first and the second language facilitate rapid and easy learning. It was proposed that by comparing the learners' native language with the target language, differences could be identified and used to predict areas of potential errors. This procedure was known as Contrastive Analysis. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis came under attack during the mid 70's as a result of empirical evidence which showed little unequivocal proof of native language interference, as well as in the form of mentalist views of language learning launched chiefly by Chomsky (1959), who vehemently refuted the idea of learning as habit-formation.3

A revival of CA however, started to take shape since the beginning of the 1980s, which was the result of the emergence of a new perspective on CA. Interestingly, while Chomsky's theory of innate language learning capacity of the human mind struck at the roots of Contrastive Analysis,
paradoxically, it was his own theory of Universal Grammar which was used to account for the validity of CA in later years. Universal Grammar proposed through its markedness theory that languages share "core" or unmarked rules which are easily transferable. The main thing to note about this reappraisal of CA is that it stressed the facilitative role of L1 transfer.

As mentioned above, a mentalist view of language learning attributed the child with an innate language learning capacity which is unique and different from general cognitive mechanisms. Those adults who achieved a native-like proficiency in an L2 were believed to have continued to use the "Language Acquisition Device" proposed by Chomsky, but those who fossilized before achieving such a proficiency, fell back on a more general cognitive mechanism, which is responsible for other types of learning too, apart from language, later came to be known as creative construction, and the mechanism responsible for this type of learning was labelled as cognitive organizer (Dulay and Burt 1977). According to the Creative Construction theory, L1 and L2 acquisition are not distinct but follow from the same set of innate principles. According to this theory, the structure of the target language input and the creative construction powers of the L2 learner which all learners share as part of the human competence, are the critical factors in acquisition. Creative Construction theory and
Krashen's Monitor Model (1981a, 1982) which are closely related to each other, assign only a peripheral role to L1 in second language learning.

Many researchers have tried to merge CA and CC within a parameter-setting model, among whom Flynn (1987a, 1987b) is one of the foremost. Flynn's parameter-setting model has been discussed in brief which assigns an important role to L1. The information processing model of SLA, described next in the chapter has been derived from cognitive psychology and is based on Anderson's (1983, 1985) account of the acquisition of "complex cognitive skills". According to this model, knowledge is stored in memory in two forms: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Knowledge represented in declarative form is converted into procedural form through extensive practice. Transfer of L1 knowledge and skills, accountable within an information processing model has been discussed next in brief. The transfer of procedural knowledge cannot be as satisfactorily described however, in this paradigm, as that of declarative knowledge.

Chapter four discusses the role that L1 has played in the history of second and foreign language teaching. Though translation happened to be the basic component of the Grammar/Translation Method in vogue for many centuries in the West, even in other methods of language teaching it played an important role, except the Direct Method and the
Audiolingual Method. In second language pedagogy in India too, mother tongue was used prominently till the advent of the Audiolingual Method in the 1960's.

After the delineating the role of translation in the history of language teaching, two theoretical problems pertaining to the role of translation in ESL are discussed in brief: translation vis-a-vis acquisition vs. learning, and translation with respect to the dichotomy between accuracy and fluency. As regards the first question, translation seems to cater chiefly to learning. However, adopting an interface position one can argue that since learning can be changed into acquisition and vice-versa, translation does have its value. As regards the second question, it has been pointed out that though translation is an accuracy, rather than a fluency activity, even accuracy activities are important in contexts where sufficient exposure to the target language is not available.

The chapter next enumerates the different instances when L1-based activities can be used profitably in L2 teaching, and discusses in brief many interesting activities proposed by ESL practitioners for use with early, intermediate and advanced level students. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of some important issues related with the use of translation in ESL, and cautions against unguarded use of L1 in the ESL classroom.
The final chapter reports the results of an empirical study assessing the role of translation as a learning strategy in ESL. It was carried out with 52 class XII students who were divided equally between a control and an experiment group. Lessons were imparted to the two groups on some vocabulary items, some phrases and the simple past and past perfect tenses. While the treatment group was given instruction through some L1-based strategies in combination with the usual L2 strategies, no L1 was employed with the control group. Adjusted gains between the pre- and post-test scores showed that lower and intermediate level students profited spectacularly through the use of L1 strategies. However, higher level students made no gains. The study also demonstrated that while the use of translation is definitely beneficial for the teaching of lexis and phrasal expressions, it did not prove to be the same for grammar, indicating the need for further research in the use of translation with grammar and other tasks.

The importance of the present empirical study lies in the fact that though the use of L1 and translation has been being advocated by ESL practitioners for quite some time now, little empirical data has been provided in this regard. There are only a few findings which show a preference on the part of early level learners to use L1-based strategies (O'Malley et al 1985a, 1985b; Del Mar et al. 1982). Only a
single study carried out by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) has been found to show that L1-based strategies are specifically beneficial for beginning level students. Hence, the present study has not only corroborated the findings of the above studies, but has also extended them to an extent.7

REFERENCES


